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ABSTRACT

The Rural Special Education Project (RSEP) is a school-based, special education teacher preparation program located on the Navajo Reservation. The program, which is a partnership between Northern Arizona University and Kayenta Unified School District, immerses Anglo participants in Navajo culture and heightens their awareness of cross-cultural and linguistic barriers to teaching and learning. About half of participants are Anglo American and half are Native American. RSEP prepares future teachers for work on the reservation. Native participants share their traditions with non-Native participants, who keep a record of taboos and cultural beliefs that could result in misunderstandings in the classroom. Among the 18 participants during the 1994-95 school year, both Native and non-Native students felt that they had benefitted from the program and would be more confident in the classroom. Anglo American students had experienced what it is like to be a minority, had adapted to a slower-paced simpler lifestyle, and felt that they would understand their Navajo students better. Native American students were able to take classes without relocating away from their families, and had gained a new perspective on Anglo culture. RSEP brings two cultures together in a positive way and promotes cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity. (SV)

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BENEFITS OF CULTURAL IMMERSION ACTIVITIES IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

In many areas of the United States there is a shortage of special education teachers. More specifically, special educators trained to work with Native American students are in extremely high demand. Mahan and Rains (1990) indicated that programs that utilize cultural immersion rather than relying on courses or books are quite powerful and result in well prepared professionals. The Rural Special Education Project (RSEP), a school-based special education teacher preparation program located on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Kayenta, Arizona addresses the issue of cultural immersion. Approximately one half of the students in the project are Anglo and one half are Native American.

The RSEP is a partnership between Northern Arizona University's (NAU) (located in Flagstaff, AZ) Center for Excellence in Education (CEE) and the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD). All project participants work in the classrooms at KUSD or Monument Valley High School in Utah.

When two cultures are placed together there are always barriers that must be overcome. Communication is an obstacle that must be dealt with anywhere, but when the language is different from the language one knows, this complicates matters. Many of the Anglo participants found this to be true in their classrooms. For example, often times a student would answer a question in Navajo instead of English knowing that the teacher intern did not know what s/he was saying. This has the same effect on certain students who do not understand English very well and may be confused when it is spoken in the classroom. Students often get frustrated because they do not know the language. Some students live with their grandparents who speak only Navajo in the home. This leaves students partially bilingual, knowing a little Navajo and knowing a little English but not fluent in either language. This causes many problems in school, as well as the home, because they do not completely understand what is being said. Problems between the teacher and the student may arise. In some cases, it may cause the child to be labeled as learning disabled when the problem is primarily a language one. Part of the RSEP includes learning a Navajo vocabulary. This helped in certain situations with students. When the Anglo participants began using words and phrases with their students, they found that the students listened more and seemed to have a certain amount of respect for them. This also made the RSEP participants

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aware of a problem with prejudging and labeling students incorrectly. This is only one of the various barriers.

Other barriers teachers may encounter in the Navajo culture deal with traditions and taboos, many of which are taught to children at a very young age. These include; letting the elderly speak without interruption, Navajo children should be seen and not heard, when a child speaks above an elder this shows great disrespect because the elder is older and much wiser, therefore children should listen and learn. This can cause many problems in the classroom. The children become very confused as to how they should act. At home they are taught to remain quiet and listen, where as in the classroom they are asked to speak their mind. When a child sits quietly in the classroom this leads teachers to believe that the student is not trying or s/he may have learning problems.

Other problems may arise when a teacher verbally or physically praises a child. Navajo children are taught that any physical contact or verbal play may lead to incest. Many times this causes these children to become embarrassed which may lead to an uncomfortable situation. Physical touch is needed at certain times. For example, some students, such as those with autism, communicate through a portable keyboard known as a communicator. In order for these students to use the communicators, they must have the help of another person, and this help requires physical touch. One Native American participant feels that more human contact is needed among her people. She believes this would build their confidence and increase their self esteem. Certain people in the native American culture feel that some traditions and taboos need to change with the times while others should remain.

One taboo in the Navajo culture deals with the handling of certain animals. More specifically, they are not to touch frogs or snakes or handle any kind of reptiles whether they are dead or alive. The reasoning behind this belief says that if someone does touch an animal they will be cursed with infection and sickness because of it. This taboo has a great effect in the classroom, especially in a science classroom. In many biology classes in high school, students are required to dissect a frog or a pig. Teachers on the reservation need to be aware of this belief and need to adapt their curriculum to it. They need to be sensitive what is practiced in the Navajo culture.

RSEP prepares future teachers for work on the reservation. The Native American participants share their traditions with the non-Native American participants. This allows the Anglos to keep a record of taboos and other cultural beliefs that may cause problems in the classroom. Without a program like this, many teachers make mistakes and may offend many of their students.

There are other cultural situations outside the classroom which RSEP prepares the Anglo participants for. The students who moved from Flagstaff to Kayenta were expected to give up many conveniences. They found that they took many things for granted before they went from an urban to a rural society. For example, laundry now had to be done at the one laundromat in town. There is not a variety of fast food restaurants to choose from. For entertainment, one

cannot just turn on a television and switch the channels in search of one's favorite show because there are no television stations in Kayenta. In order to watch television, one must have cable. There are no movie theaters or dance clubs to attend on the weekends. However, all have found and enjoyed many alternatives to these types of entertainment. Kayenta offers some great hiking and other outdoor activities that the students take advantage of on a regular basis.

Students have also had to adapt to a slower paced society. Coming from a hurried lifestyle and often getting things taken care of in one or two days, it was quite challenging for the students to slow down. For instance, a couple of students were frustrated after waiting a month before their phone was hooked up, while another group of students asked for a plumber three times while their plumbing backed up and flooded their home. Although each of these things was an inconvenience to the students, they were both taken care of in time.

Many times teachers come to the reservation unaware of the culture and traditions. The following information was taken from informal interviews conducted by participants in the RSEP. Six Anglo female teachers and six Anglo male teachers were interviewed form two different high schools. Approximately fifty percent were from Kayenta, Arizona and fifty percent were from Monument Valley, Utah. We found that many felt that they would have benefited from a program such as RSEP. They expressed that it would have helped them understand their students better. It would give them a better idea of what and how to teach because they would understand the culture. They would recognize the language barrier and know how to deal with it. By going through a program like RSEP, they would experience living in a rural area without the conveniences they may be used to. Two of the teachers that we talked with did go through a program similar to RSEP. The program sent them to rural settings for student teaching. One teacher who went through that program has been teaching on the reservation for four years now. The other teacher recently accepted a job to teach in Kayenta. Because of that program these teachers felt they were well prepared to teach on the reservation.

The participants in RSEP 94-95, nine Native Americans and nine Anglos, have gained a great deal from this experience, both culturally as well as educationally. An informal survey was conducted with this class. The question that was asked; how each person felt they had benefited from this program. Many Native American students expressed that RSEP has given them the opportunity to further their education without having to go to a university campus. By taking classes in Kayenta, they did not have to relocate their families. One Native American student feels that culturally, this program has helped him relate to other cultures. This program has given the Native American students a chance to see the Anglo culture in a way that may be different from the way they were taught.

After spending twenty hours a week in the classroom for nine months, both native American and Anglo participants feel that they are more confident in the classroom. As one Native American student said, she has "learned how

some (teachers) can handle their classroom and (how) some need that extra help." Another student says she is able to apply what she has learned in her NAU class to a real-life classroom setting instead of reading about it in a textbook. This is something that is not available in a traditional campus based teacher training program.

The Anglo students have benefited culturally in various ways. Every Anglo participant shared that they now knew what it was like to be a minority. This gives these teacher interns an edge when they enter their classroom. They will be able to empathize with each and every one of their students, whether they be in the majority or in the minority. Being on the reservation has made many of the participants look at themselves for who they are. It has brought out some prejudices that certain people did not know they had. By bringing these into the light, it has allowed us to deal with them and overcome them as well. The experience has been a humbling one. The participants, primarily the Anglos, have learned to appreciate people for who they are. They have learned to take life as it comes. Problems that may have seemed big at one point in their lives are now insignificant compared to what they have seen and dealt with being on the reservation.

RSEP is not just another program that benefits its participants educationally. It has brought two cultures together in a positive way. It does not only teach its participants how to be teachers, it shows them how to live and learn from each other. Unfortunately, in some work places, whether it be a business, a corporation or a school, there is prejudice and discrimination. It is a part of life that we need to continue to try to eliminate. Programs such as the RSEP promote cultural awareness, sensitivity and understanding.

***Note:** The information included in this paper are the perceptions of the authors regarding their cultural experiences. The information obtained through informal surveys may lack the scientific rigor to be generalized. However, we do feel this information in interesting and may have some practical implications.

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